



Uniwersytet
Wrocławski

ISSN 1648-4789 (print)
ISSN 2029-2775 (online)
SOCIALINIS DARBAS
SOCIAL WORK
2012, 11(2), p. 245–256.

INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN LITHUANIAN FAMILIES

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Submitted on 28 August 2012

Accepted on 15 November 2012

Abstract

Emphasizing the significant socio-demographic changes of the last decades (family transformation and ageing of modern societies), the capability of family to perform some of its essential functions (i.e., care for the elderly) and to maintain solidarity between generations is being questioned both in academic and social policy discourse.

Statistical and socio-demographic research data show that the processes related with deinstitutionalisation of a family and a rapid increase in the number of elderly people are observed in Lithuania as well. This indicates a relevance of the questions raised by Western sociologists regarding the fragmentation of social and personal ties and modification of relationships between generations (both “within” and “outside” a family) to the national context.

The article explores the peculiarities of intergenerational communication in Lithuanian families, aiming to reveal the frequency of contact between parents and children, patterns of their interaction and emotional closeness—the dimensions that are crucial to an understanding of the intergenerational solidarity, exchange and support in a family. Analysis is based on the data of questionnaire survey of the Lithuanian population

representing four age cohorts (persons born in 1950-1955, 1960-1965, 1970-1975 and 1980-1985, N=2000), carried out in 2011-2012.

The methodology of conducted quantitative research is discussed in the first chapter; the second chapter presents analysis of empirical data. Conducted research provides evidence of maintenance of regular communication between respondents and their children/parents living apart, and reveals a more active women's role in interaction. Personal relationships are viewed commonly through emotional prism and are given, in overall, high evaluation, thus indicating the strong bonds between generations in Lithuanian families.

Keywords: family, generations, relationships, parents, children, communication.

Introduction

Family changes that have persisted for almost five decades in Western societies have altered the structure of its social networks and the character of relationships:

- Influenced by increasing life expectancy, *the kinship structure has considerably extended*, as many families today have even four-five generations alive at the same time (instead of two-three as was a century ago);
- Influenced by significant changes in family formation patterns (these changes are labeled in demographic literature as a Second demographic transition [Van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1995]), *the kinship structure has become both more complex and fragmented*;
- Influenced by the shift of living arrangements, or by the growth of the number of people living alone, *the patterns of interacting with others are changing*;
- Influenced by the increase of scope and a spread of new types of migration, *the character of interpersonal linkages has been transformed and the means of interaction have changed* (with the aid of modern communication and transportation, the relationships can be maintained notwithstanding "spatial detachment").

The pessimistic interpretations of these changes emphasize the rise of individualism and challenge the ability of family to maintain solidarity between its members and to provide potential in terms of support and care for the elderly (Chambers, 2006, p. 3). Considering the rapid demographic ageing (the increasing longevity and the growth of the number/proportions of the old people), certain scholars argue that these caring roles of family become vital and put "intergenerational family relations squarely on the political and scientific agenda" (Willis, Martins, 2005, p. 35).

A shift from traditional towards a modern family model (a decrease of the total number of marriages and births, postponement of marriage to an older age, the spread of consensual unions, growth of divorce rates and births outside of wedlock) occurred in Lithuania only in the 1990s, i.e. more than twenty years later, compared to many Western countries. These demographic developments were a sequence of a turn in behaviour and attitudes of Lithuanian population, conditioned by socio-economic and political transformations of the state (Stankūnienė, et al., 2003). Statistical and

socio-demographic research data (Juozeliūnienė, 2008; Stankūnienė, Maslauskaitė, 2007; Stankūnienė et al., 2000; Stankūnienė, 1997) show that the changes of a family as social institution are very rapid; they are followed by pervasion of the new family types (e.g., single parents, transnational families, etc.) and a growth of a number of one-person households—as an outcome of a significant increase of the scope of emigration and acceleration of demographic ageing. Therefore, it can be maintained that the questions raised by Western sociologists regarding the fragmentation of social and personal ties and modification of relationships between generations (both “within” and “outside” a family) are highly relevant in the Lithuanian context as well. What is (and will be in a future) the role of family in ensuring the welfare and maintaining the social integration of the elderly, is it possible to state that these functions of family are weakening?

Intergenerational relationships are acquiring much attention in national sociological, demographic and social policy discourse—one may find publications presenting an assessment of contemporary theoretical explanations (Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, 2009), macro-level analysis of these relationships in the framework of ageing research (Mikulionienė, 2011; Kanopienė, Mikulionienė, 2011) or social policy evaluation (Dromantienė, Kanopienė, 2004; Kanopienė, Mikulionienė, 2006). Rich empirical data concerning the provision of personal care and emotional support in a family, attitudes towards responsibilities of children for caring their parents, when parents are in need were collected in the framework of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS)¹ (Baublytė, Stankūnienė, 2007–2008).

One of the most important aspects of relations between individuals as representatives of different age cohorts/generations is interpersonal communication, viewed from contemporary research perspective as “more than information transmission between two people. Instead, it becomes the way that humans [...] negotiate relationships” (Baxter, Braithwaite, 2008, p. 4), or provide exchange and support (Willis, Martin, 2005, p. 43).

Communication, as an important dimension of intergenerational relationships in Lithuanian families, is still under-researched, and this makes a novelty of conducted study.

The article *aims* to reveal the peculiarities of intergenerational communication, focusing on the frequency of contacts between parents and children, patterns of their interaction and emotional closeness—the dimensions that are essential to an understanding of the exchange and support in a family. The object of investigation: the Lithuanian population, representing 1950–1985 m. birth cohorts. Analysis is based on the data of questionnaire survey, carried out in 2011–2012.

¹ National representative survey was conducted in 2006 as a component of the international Generations and Gender Programme (GGP), 10 036 respondents aged 18–79 were interviewed.

1. Research methodology and characteristics of the sample

Quantitative research was conducted in the frame of the project “Trajectories of family models and social networks: intergenerational dimension” (Famo-Socnet).² The project aims to explore the interrelation between the family social networks (their structure and functions) and family models, considering the changes in personal and family-life trajectories. Relevance of such studies is heightened in today’s sociological discourse, e.g., Jallinoja and Widmer indicate that “efforts to trace the models of family organisation, discern their underlying structures and informal rules, and ascertain their contribution to the larger society should be back on the agenda of family sociology” (Jallinoja, Widmer, 2011: 6). In order to explain the interplay between family events, historical events and social environment, both macro- and micro-levels’ analysis is combined in the project, applying quantitative and qualitative research methods. Questionnaire survey, aimed at the investigation of family-life trajectories in the intergenerational perspective, was the first step taken in order to reveal the peculiarities of social relations and patterns of communication both “within” and “outside” a family.

The research design and instrument (questionnaire) was developed in cooperation with project partners—Institute of Social Sciences at University of Lisbon (ICS-UL) and Universities of Geneva and Lausanne (UNIGE and UNIL). In later stages of analysis this will allow the introduction of an international comparative dimension.

Questionnaire form encompasses five component parts (A) Life events; B) The important things in life; C) Social networks; D) Attitudes and values; E) Personal information) and amounts more than 100 questions.

Questionnaire survey—face-to-face structured interviews at respondent’s home was carried out during a period from November, 2011 till a very beginning of May, 2012, the field work was performed by the Public opinion and market research company “Vilmorus Ltd.”³ A total of 2000 respondents, representing the age cohorts born respectively in 1950-1955, 1960-1965, 1970-1975 and 1980-1985 were interviewed (500 respondents in each age cohort). Respondents were chosen by multistage stratified random sampling, representing age, sex and geographical territory. The focus on these particular age groups was based on the following presumptions:

- The twenty years gap between the selected cohorts enables to reveal the consistent patterns of linkages between the family and social networks in dynamic perspective;
- The age of the youngest cohort under study ranges around the average age of family formation while the eldest cohort was in the same age during the years of Lithuania’s political and socio-economic transformations.

² Project “Trajectories of family models and social networks: intergenerational dimension” (code No. VP1-3.1-ŠMM-07-K-01-106) is financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) and Lithuanian government under the Human Resources Development Operational Programme’s 3rd priority “Strengthening of capacities of researchers and scientists.” Measure VP1-3.1-ŠMM-07-K “Support for scientific activities of scientists and other researchers (Global grant).” <<http://famo-socnet.mruni.eu>>.

³ Questionnaire survey followed the key ethical principles that should underlie the sociological research—voluntary participation of interviewed persons, confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. The potential respondents were fully informed about the interview procedures and the main goals of the investigation; they gave a personal consent to participate.

Males make 47,9% and females—52,1%, a majority (90,8%) of interviewed persons are of Lithuanian nationality, the rest are Polish (4,1%), Russians (3,1%) or of other nationality (0,9%). Respondents have different levels of education: 4,6% are with basic or lower education, 14,3% have graduated secondary and 21,2%—professional school, 26,8% have diploma of higher (college) studies and 12%—of integral (university) studies, 11,8% hold bachelor's, 7,9%—master's and 0,3%—doctoral degree (no answer—0,1%). The distribution of respondents by place of residence is as follows:

- rural areas (settlements with less than 500 inhabitants)—23,6%;
- small towns (settlements with a number of inhabitants between 500-3000)—6,6%;
- towns (a number of inhabitants between 3000- 5000)—1,7%;
- towns (a number of inhabitants between 5000-50000)—20,9%;
- towns (a number of inhabitants between 5000-100000) – 4,1%;
- big towns (a number of inhabitants between 100001-250000) – 12,6%;
- Large cities with more than 250001 inhabitants—30, 6%.

2. Research findings

Sociological perspective offers a deeper insight into the picture of contemporary families, enabling not only to identify a variety of formation trajectories and types, but also to reveal the similarities and dissimilarities between them, to capture the features of particular relations both within a family as a small group and its connections with other groups/social surrounding.

Different theoretical approaches applied in family studies (Family Development, Symbolic-Interactionist, Systems Framework, etc.) enable to explain different aspects of its functioning and development. In sociological research family is seen, first and foremost, as a primary group that carries out fundamental roles in society. It is also defined “as an organisation of primary relationships founded upon the difference of gender and the differences between generations” (Scabini, et al., 2006, p. 4). This definition integrates a view on family as a structure with internal hierarchical relationships between parents and children (in many past and present cultures also between the spouses), and as a group within which the individuals fulfil their social roles—the connection of relationships to roles is inclusive (Ibid: p. 5).

Drawing attention to the extended kinship structure (because of the increasing longevity many families today span over four-five generations alive at the same time instead of two-three a century ago), many authors indicate to the changing character of these relationships, emphasizing their dynamism and volatility, also drawing attention to the fact that parent-offspring relationships overstep the traditional setting: children and parents share many common experiences being at different stages of their respective lives (Riley, 1997, p. 410).

It is important to stress, that *idem* generations simultaneously fulfil the role of children and the role of parents or even the role of grandparents, and this is particularly true with regard to the midlife's, or those in the forties and sixties. The problems of the so-called sandwich generation, particularly women's, regarding the coordination of dif-

ferent responsibilities in a family and other social (professional) roles are broadly raised and discussed in a feminist and sociological discourse (Willis, Martin, 2005). The less explored issues involve the investigation of the impact of these “double” (or even “triple”) family commitments on the sustenance of the personal bonds and solidarity between generations. Considering the importance of communication in understanding of some dimensions of family/intergenerational solidarity, such as associational solidarity (the degree to which children and parents are in contact with one another) and effectual solidarity (the degree of positive sentiment expressed in the intergenerational relationship), we shall focus on analysis of these particular aspects of interaction.

2.1. Communication with children

The parents' generation is represented by a larger proportion of respondents—79% of interviewed females have children (among them—36,7% have one child, 47,5%—two children, and 15,8%—three and more) and 67,1% of males have children (among them—35,5% have one child, 50,6%—two children, and 13,9%—three and more). Considering the young age of the respondents, i.e. only the oldest have reached, or are approaching a seventh decade of their life, it is not surprising that most of them still have children/youngest child living in the same household. On the other hand, the older cohorts under survey represent a generation of soviet times who got married and had children at a young age, therefore 87% of fathers and 81% of mothers have children/at least one child who live separately, *among them*:

- 45,8% of males and 40,6% of females have a daughter or son who lives up to 1 hour distance from their home;
- 31,1% of males and 32,0% of females have children who live in longer distance;
- One out of four (23, 1% of males and 27,4% of females) have children who live abroad.⁴

What is the impact of living apart, especially of living in different countries/unlike social and cultural environment on the quality of relationships between parents and children? The literature can hardly provide a clear and unambiguous answer—the opinions that spatial mobility “contributes” to the erosion of traditional forms of social unity such as kinship (Chambers, 2006, p. 1) as well as the quite opposite views that in the age of modern communication technologies “geographic distance should be distinguished from social distance” (Bruggeman, 2008, p. 9) can be found in scholarly discourse.

According to the survey results, a vast majority (91, 8% of males and 96, 4% of females) have communicated during a period of the three months (prior survey) with their separately living child at least in one of these ways:

- face-to face (respectively 90,6 and 88,6 %)
- by telephone (respectively 96,4 and 97,0%),
- by Skype (respectively 30,6 and 33,8%)
- by e-mail (respectively 9,3 and 12,9%)
- in social networks (respectively 3,0 and 2,1%)

⁴ Calculations are based on the number of persons with children

The emotional closeness between parents and children is assessed on the basis of asking respondents to indicate the degree of their acceptance of a number of statements that reveal certain aspects of supportive behaviour of the younger generation as well as personal evaluation of parent-child relationships (table 1).

Table 1. *Character of relationships with the oldest child, percent*

	Strongly agree/ agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree/ Strongly disagree		Not applicable/ No answer	
	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males
Son/daughter usually greets me, on a birthday or other festive occasions	89,8	84,6	2,7	3,7	1,1	5,0	6,4	6,7
Communication with son/daughter gives me positive emotions	87,1	84,1	5,3	8,0	2,0	1,8	5,6	6,1
We are friends	85,1	80,3	8,3	11,8	1,8	3,0	4,8	4,9
My son /daughter is discussing with me important decision-making issues	58,7	44,0	19,1	27,4	10,6	18,5	11,6	10,1
Son/daughter is my helper at home	58,6	47,0	17,9	20,3	14,3	23,6	9,2	9,1
Our views on life values are similar	56,5	44,3	23,9	32,3	9,5	12,8	10,1	10,6
My relationship with son/daughter is strained	3,0	3,9	5,0	9,4	83,0	77,7	9,0	9,0
Me and my son/daughter are at a distance from each other	3,3	6,8	5,5	10,0	82,6	75,4	8,6	7,8

As is seen, most frequently respondents have referred to the traditional forms of expression of personal ties—children's greetings on birthdays or other festive occasions, which may have a highly emotional connotation (expression of children's feelings—love, devotion, etc.) or, on the opposite, can be just a formal manifestation of compliance to the social rules. Very positively relationships with children are assessed, if viewed through an "emotional prism" (*communication with son/daughter gives me positive emotions, we are friends*). These statements, to a certain extent, reflect deeply personal views of parents (perhaps, even their unwillingness to admit that it might be otherwise, that the expectations, which are traditionally associated with children,⁵

⁵ Parenting/child rearing allows to answer basic human hopes and psychological needs (Hoffmann, Hoffmann, 1973)

may not be confirmed). However, when it comes to more impartial confirmation of closeness and affinity of the relationships with children (*my son/daughter is discussing with me the important decision-making issues, our views on life values are similar*), a degree of optimism decreases quite noticeably (even about 1,5-2 times among males), although a proportion of those who have supported the statements still makes more than a half among females. The same can be said about the recipients of instrumental support (*son/daughter is my helper at home*). On the other hand, quite a few have admitted that a character of relationships with children is alienated and causes stress to parents (*my relationship with son/daughter is strained, me and my son/daughter are at a distance from each other*).

The data shows that the relationships between mothers and their sons/daughters are better evaluated—the share of supporting “positive” statements is noticeably higher and, respectively, a proportion of supporting “negative” statements is lower among female respondents. This confirms the findings of other research (Kanopienė, 1999; Maslauskaitė, 2004) that parenting and related commitments are primarily (or to a much greater extent) women’s responsibility in Lithuanian families. A more active role of women is also revealed regarding communication with parents.

2.2. Communication with parents

A better part of persons under survey (67,6%) have a mother and 42,6%—a father who are alive:

- 23,4% of those who have a mother live with her in the same household, 54,1%—in one hour travel distance from their home, 20,1%—in a longer distance and 1,7% have indicated that their mother lives abroad.
- Respectively 19,9% of those who have father live with him in a same household, 54,7%—in one hour travel distance from their home, 21,3%—in a longer distance and 2,1% have indicated that their father lives abroad.

According to the survey results, interruption of constant (regular) communication between children and parents living apart is a very rare exception—a vast majority have communicated during a period of the three months (prior survey) with their mother (97,2%) and with their father (94,5%) at least in one of these ways:

- Face-to face (with mother—99,3% of males and 98,2% of females; respectively with father—98,6% of males and 97,2% of females);
- By telephone (with mother—97,1% of males and 98,4% of females; respectively with father—94,8% of males and 97,5% of females);
- By Skype (with mother—7,1% of males and 6,7% of females; respectively with father—6,7% of males and 7,2% of females);
- By e-mails (with mother—1,7% of males and 5,0% of females; respectively with father—2,3% of males and 4,8% of females).

Very active communication with parents is maintained both by sons and daughters – this indicates that their ties are close enough. As the data of Table 2 show, the interrelation between children and parents of the same sex (between the daughters—mothers and the sons- fathers) receive more positive evaluation than between children

and parents of the opposite sexes (between the daughters-fathers and the sons-mothers). On the other hand, regardless of the sex of the respondent, in overall relationships with mother are assessed better, thus, it can be suggested that women are the ones who make a “backbone” of family (child-parent) relationships.

Table 2. *Character of relationships with parents by gender**

Statement	Relationships		Relationships	
	females	males	females	males
I greet my mother/father on birthday or other festive occasions	96,7	93,5	88,9	89,3
Communication with my mother/father gives me positive emotions	78,1	74,8	63,4	69,8
We are friends	75,2	70,6	58,3	72,0
I discuss important decision-making questions with my mother/father	48,7	32,9	28,7	37,1
Mother/father is my helper at home	43,6	45,6	39,8	45,5
Our views on life values are similar	54,1	44,4	36,6	47,2
My relationship with mother/father is strained	4,8	5,6	6,7	7,6
I communicate with my mother/father out of obligation only	4,3	4,8	7,4	5,9

* Percent of respondents who have strongly agreed/agreed with the statement

If we compare the communication patterns with parents and children, some differences can be traced:

- respondents almost twice more often visit mother and/or father at their parents' home than on the opposite, while face-to-face communication with their living apart children more frequently takes place at the respondents' home;
- Modern information technologies (Skype e-mails) are mostly used in communication with children.

As regards the subjective assessment of relationships with parents/children, it's apparent that personal ties with children, especially emotional closeness with them are given higher evaluation.

As was mentioned earlier, interpersonal communication (viewed as a process) is inherent from a provision of support. It can be suggested that in case of respondents' parents, communication might be related with provision of instrumental and/or companionship support (direct physical assistance, spending time with, etc.), while considering respondents' children there would be appropriate to talk about appraisal and/or informational support (giving advice, asking questions, listening, etc.).⁶ These intergenerational communication issues are the objective of future research.

⁶ Social support is a multidimensional construct. In literature supportive behaviour is divided into six categories: emotional support, appraisal support, informational support, instrumental support, companionship support and negative support behavior (Regan, 2011, p. 155-156)

CONCLUSIONS

1. Questionnaire survey of the Lithuanian population representing four age cohorts (persons born in the period of 1950-1985, N=2000), conducted in 2011-2012 within the frame of the project "Trajectories of family models and social networks: intergenerational dimension" aimed to explore various aspects of family life and personal relations in the intergenerational perspective. One of the research objectives was to reveal the impact of living apart on the quality of relationships between parents and children
2. Conducted research gives evidence of persistence of strong intergenerational solidarity in Lithuanian families, and this is manifested in actual behaviour and attitudes. Regular contacts with children and parents are maintained by a vast majority of respondents. If we compare the communication patterns with parents and children, some differences can be traced: respondents almost twice more often visit mother and/or father at their parents' home than on the opposite, while immediate meetings with their living apart children more frequently takes place at the respondents' home; face-to-face communication with children is complemented by online interactions, however, modern information technologies (Skype, e-mails) are used in communication with parents very rarely.
3. Despite a very positive evaluation of personal relationships, most frequently references to the traditional forms of expression of personal ties (e.g. greetings on birthday) are made or the views are grounded on personal emotions rather than facts. As regards the subjective assessment of relationships with parents/children, it's apparent that personal ties with children, especially emotional closeness with them, are given higher evaluation. The interrelation between daughters—mothers/sons—fathers receive more positive evaluation than between children and parents of the opposite sexes (daughters-fathers and sons-mothers).

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Santrauka

Atkreipiant dėmesį į reikšmingus socialinius-demografinius pastarųjų dešimtmečių pokyčius (šeimos transformaciją ir modernių visuomenių senėjimą), akademiniame ir socialinės politikos diskurse vis dažniau keliamos abejonės dėl šeimos galimybių atlikti kai kurias jos esmines funkcijas (senyvo amžiaus asmenų globą ir priežiūrą) bei išlaikyti solidarumą tarp kartų. Straipsnyje nagrinėjami bendravimo tarp kartų ypatumai Lietuvos šeimose, siekiant atskleisti kontaktų tarp tėvų ir vaikų ypatumus (jų dažnį, bendravimo būdus) bei emocinius ryšius, t. y. tuos tarpusavio sąveikos aspektus, kurie leidžia įvertinti kai kurias svarbias tarpgeneracinio solidarumo dimensijas bei paramos teikimą šeimose. Tyrimo objektas: 1950–1985 m. gimimo kartoms atstovaujantys gyventojai. Analizė grindžiama anketinės apklausos, atliktos 2011–2012 m., duomenimis. Jos metu buvo apklausta 2000 respondentų, atitinkamai po 500 keturiose amžiaus kohortose (1950–1955, 1960–1965, 1970–1975 ir 1980–1985 m. gimimo), kurie buvo atrinkti, remiantis kvotine atranka pagal amžių, lytį ir gyvenamąją vietovę. Tyrimo dizainas ir instrumentas (klausesimynas) parengti bendradarbiaujant su užsienio (Šveicarijos ir Portugalijos) sociologais, apklausos anketą sudarė penki klausimų blokai, apimantys daugiau nei 100 klausimų. Apklausos būdas – struktūruoti interviu respondentų namuose.

Atlikto kiekybinio tyrimo metodologija pateikta pirmajame straipsnio skyriuje, antrajame aptariami duomenys, atskleidžiantys įvairius skirtingų kartų šeimos narių tarpusavio bendravimo aspektus. Tyrimo rezultatų analizė rodo, kad absoliuti dauguma (per 90 proc.) respondentų nuolat bendrauja su atskirai gyvenančiais savo vaikais ir tėvais, išlaikydami glaudžius asmeninius ryšius. Lyginant bendravimo su vaikais ir tėvais modelius, galima pastebėti kai kuriuos skirtumus (tėvai dažniau aplankomi jų namuose, bendraujant su vaikais aktyviau naudojamos šiuolaikinės informacinės technologijos). Aptariant subjektyvų santykių su savo vaikais ir tėvais vertinimą, dažniausiai pateikiamos nuorodos į tradicines asmeninių ryšių išraiškos formas (pvz., gimtadienio sveikinimus) bei pritariama tvirtinimams, jog šie ryšiai teikia teigiamas emocijas. Ryšiai su vaikais yra vertinami kiek aukščiau, kas gali atspindėti ne tik tarpusavio santykių būklę, bet ir tam tikrus socialiai determinuotus tėvų lūkesčius vaikų atžvilgiu. Tyrimas atskleidė aktyvesnę moterų vaidmenį skirtingų kartų šeimos narių interakcijos procese ir parodė, kad su savo tėvais glaudžiau tarpusavyje bendrauja tos pačios lyties asmenys (dukros-motinos ir sūnūs-tėvai).

Reikšminiai žodžiai: šeima, kartos, tėvai, vaikai, bendravimas.